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Texas WASP honored by Sen. Hutchison in Dallas Ceremony

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11/12/2009 - RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas -- It's been nearly 70 years, but one of the most untold stories of World War II can finally come to a close.

The Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II were presented with a commemorative copy of a bill awarding them the Congressional Gold Medal in a ceremony for Texas native WASP Wednesday at the Frontiers of Flight Museum in Dallas.

Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison sponsored the legislation in early 2009, and only three months later would go on to award the WASP the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest honor the U.S. Congress can bestow on a civilian for service to their country.



Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison R-Texas addresses an attentive crowd during an award presentation for the Texas Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II at Love Field in Dallas, Texas Nov. 11. (Photo by Senior Airman Katie Hickerson)

"This is, indeed, a time to honor all of those who have served our country," said Senator Hutchison in her address to the WASP. "I am so fortunate to be able to serve on the United States Senate and to honor not only the veterans who are here with us, but to honor those who have died before to assure that our country is the strongest, and best, in the world."

In 1939, Jacqueline Cochran, who would go on to become the WASP director, wrote to then-First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, stating, "I think we should train women pilots to fly non-combat assignments to free the men to go into combat."

The idea seemed to catch on, and in 1941 Gen. Hap Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Corps, asked Ms. Cochran to select 24 fellow women and sent them on a pioneer mission to visit the British Transport Auxiliary to see how they integrated women into their military. The next year, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote in her weekly column, "My Day," that women pilots were a weapon waiting to be used and, in November, the first class of 29 women aviators began their training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas.

WASP faced overwhelming cultural and gender bias against women in nontraditional roles, but were able to overcome those injustices in order to serve their country as American military aviators, Senator Hutchison explained. Assignments included flying as test and instructor pilots, towing targets for air-to-air gunnery and ground-to-air anti-aircraft practice, ferrying, transporting personnel and cargo, smoke laying, night tracking and flying drones.

As stated in Congress' findings leading to passing Bill 111-40 into public law, WASP flew more than 60 million miles for their country in every type of aircraft and on every type of assignment except combat, but were never awarded full military status, and were ineligible to become officers. However, through their actions, the WASP eventually were the catalyst for revolutionary reform in the integration of women pilots into the armed services.

"You are great Americans from the greatest generation," said Col. Jacqueline Van Ovost, 12th Flying Training Wing commander and ceremony guest speaker. "Women like me and other female Airmen owe you a huge debt of gratitude. Today's female Airmen stand on your shoulders because of your pioneer achievements."

"We are able to see our dreams, not only to fly, but to serve in almost every career in our military today, because you paved our way. You broke the barriers and are pioneers of an industry that was mostly reserved for men only. Your service in World War II established a new frontier - a frontier women aviators have been expanding ever since, but you were first."

More than 25,000 women signed up to become aviators, but only 1,074 were accepted. Trainees came from across the U.S. to Texas, the only location for WASP training, and after 27 weeks of flight training, the WASP graduated and went on to one of 120 Army air fields across the nation.

One Austin native reflected on her time as a WASP.

"It was mind-blowing after all this time to have been notified of this award," explained Betty Phillips Whiting, a Texas WASP.

Ms. Whiting told of one day when she was asked to accompany a fellow WASP to pick up a part for an aircraft in Indiana. The weather forecast showed some "rough but flyable" weather.

"Of the two of us, I was the only one instrument-rated, so when it started to get rough, I took the stick," she said. "When we got close to the airfield, I circled only once to let them know I was there, and when we came in to land, there were several men and women there to catch our wings and bring us down."

"It was dangerous and exciting then, but it was so much fun," she reflected.

A few years after the WASP inception, it looked as though the U.S. would win the war and when it was all over, WASP service ended. There were no honors, no benefits, very few "thank-yous," and they had the task of finding their own way home after their courageous and honorable service, Senator Hutchison explained.

In all, 38 women lost their lives in service. Their families were left with burial expenses, families couldn't fly a gold star in their window in memory of their loved one and the WASP themselves weren't even allowed the honor of a flag-draped coffin at their internment since Congress never officially recognized the WASP as military members.

This year, more than 60 years after the first WASP graduating class, Congress set the record right. Both the House and Senate supported Bill 111-40 into public law, and on July 1, President Barack Obama signed it.

In March 2010, in a ceremony during Women's History Month, officials in Washington, D.C., will host a formal national award ceremony to officially recognize the service of our nation's WASP.

"Thank you for braving everything that you did, for not taking 'no' for an answer, and for saying you were going to serve our country no matter how many obstacles there were," Senator Hutchison remarked. "You did, and we owe you so very much."